

2025 Commencement Address — “Stand Together” Mike Shum ‘07

Thank you for the introduction and inviting me to speak here today, President Whitaker. I’m so honored to have the privilege of addressing Colorado College trustees, distinguished faculty, alumni, staff, and loving family and friends who traveled here to celebrate the class of 2025.

Good morning seniors and congratulations!

It is an unbelievable feeling standing here today, 18 years after my own graduation. It’s been a long and amazing journey to get here and I’m grateful for that. But I think it’s important to remind myself that every journey comes with missteps, hardship, and consequences.

Here are some of mine: I’ve broken phones, computers, and crashed hard drives. I’ve dropped my camera more than two dozen times. Broken four. I’ve been detained three times while filming. One time I was briefly kidnapped. I’ve been scammed three times and robbed five times. I ended a business partnership. I’ve been fired from 2 jobs. I’ve lost friends. I’ve lost loved ones. I’ve cried to myself, many times. I got scared many times too. I still get scared.

When I feel fear, I remind myself of the people who gave me strength along the way — people who took the time to see me — really see me. Today, I’d like to share the words of some of those people: CC alumni, a college professor, and a famous rapper.

One of the alumni is David Burnett, class of 1968 and a world-renowned photojournalist who covered the horrors of the Vietnam War. He was

also my commencement speaker. I remember the ceremony. It was outside on the quad in front of Armstrong Hall. The sun was beaming, and I sat behind three remarkably tall classmates, so I couldn't really see anything.

But something David said — or rather his voice on the loudspeaker said — stayed with me. “Don't forget how you got here,” he said. “No one does it alone.”

Keep in mind, the support of your fellow classmates, that doesn't have to end. After you graduate today, you'll find that the community of your college years will only expand to a wide network of alumni and affiliates. Today, I have the great honor of welcoming you into this bigger community, which has been so crucial in my own life.

Back then, though, on my graduation day, I wasn't thinking about community. I was thinking about whether my family's lunch reservation at Jose Muldoon's could add one more person.

I was also thinking about pursuing a career in filmmaking and how absurd that idea felt.

You see, I majored in Sociology. I had no money. I didn't have a film internship lined up, and I admit I was too afraid to apply to film school.

So I reached out to one of my mentors, the late Professor Adrienne Seward for wisdom. I remember her sitting me down in her office, her hands came together. She rocked back in her chair, carefully choosing her words. She told me, and I'm paraphrasing:

“Facing fear is like stepping into a dark doorway. Don’t close your eyes, keep them wide open. You realize you start to feel your eyes adjusting. You can make out the walls and sense the obstacles before you. You focus on your steps. If you start out slowly, your footing gets better. You’ll know when to speed up. You’ll know when you get braver.”

I started out slowly.

I took my first job with the Admission Office here at Colorado College. I was tasked with American Ethnic Minority Recruitment and application review. I thought, what better way to use my Sociology degree, while also saving up to buy a video camera.

What I didn’t expect was how my community grew to include new friends, colleagues, and administrators. I met incredible prospective students and their families, one of whom is now a professor of psychology here, Juan Miguel Arias.

I saw how vast and accomplished the CC alumni network is and met many of them personally including Dr. Neal Baer, Class of 1973.

Neal is a medical doctor and also a television writer. At the time, he was executive producer of the hit TV series, Law and Order: Special Victims Unit. Like many alumni, Neal was generous with his time. We talked at length about storytelling and how the Block Plan has this unique ability to grow filmmakers. He then graciously invited me to come to New York and join the show’s director’s apprenticeship.

I left my job at the college. At the studio, I met everybody: the director, cinematographer, the writer, big-time actors. And I thought, “Wow, I could get used to sets and actors. I’m going to make crime drama

television.” But it was renowned actor and rapper, Ice-T, who convinced me to walk a different path.

Allow me to explain:

Part of filming took place in Coney Island which meant everything took three times longer resulting in a lot of waiting around. That’s when Ice-T called me over, “Yo, what’s your story kid?”

I told him about the Block Plan and how I started out in film, making short documentaries. I told him about filming the criminalization of poverty in Chicago, filming in Tanzania in East Africa, and later filming a Block trip in Sierra Leone with Sociology Professor, Wade Roberts.

Suddenly, he interrupted, “Hold up, I don’t get it, why are you on Law and Order filming with us?”

He saw I was puzzled, “You sound like you really dig this documentary thing,” he said. “Why don’t you go out and see what you can do with that and if it doesn’t work out, come on back to the set of the NYPD, I’ll still be here.” Ice was right. Sometimes the people around you see something you don’t.

I applied to Stanford’s Master’s in Fine Arts Program in Documentary Film. The plan was to learn about cameras, lights, editing, basically all the necessary skills that I would need to make a “professional” documentary. The thing is I did NOT get into Stanford University. And that was the end of my plan. I felt rejection. Heartbroken. I felt like I wasn’t allowed. The letter could have easily read, “Documentary film, not for you.” But the reality was I faced a choice: I could dwell in my disappointment or take another step into the unknown. So I chose to take whatever money I saved and bought a one-way ticket to East Africa.

I'm telling you this story because sometimes you don't quite know what the dream is until you start pursuing it. Now I'm not saying everyone should run off to East Africa, but I believe there is moral value in abandoning the so-called "plan" and stepping into that dark doorway described by Professor Adrienne Seward.

For me, embracing the unknown was embracing curiosity.

But in 2011, curiosity evolved into responsibility. I was on a humanitarian aid ship headed to Tripoli during the Libyan Revolution, my first active warzone. I actually reached out to my commencement speaker, David Burnett, for advice. He told me,

"Eyes open, capture history, and don't die."

I found my purpose in journalism.

Reporting, fact-gathering, fact-checking, and the overall process of journalism — became integral to my filmmaking process. Capturing history became a responsibility.

Over the past 15 years, I've been fortunate enough to share the history of some of the most inspiring, beautiful and at times painful, human stories across the globe.

I found purpose in holding power accountable.

I found purpose in showing diverse perspectives across a political, racial, and socioeconomic divides.

I found purpose in shedding light on stories that would otherwise remain lost or hidden.

Journalism also became a tool for facing fear. I admit, I was a bit nervous getting up on stage here today. So to combat my fear, I started reporting on this year's graduating class. I spoke with members of the faculty, administration, and the student body.

Here's some of what I learned: There are 547 of you graduating here today, one of the largest classes of Colorado College – at least that's what the registrar said.

Among you there are runners, rock climbers, scuba divers, musicians. Skiers and snowboarders...okay, *too many* skiers and snowboarders.

You're diverse. You come from different countries, different parts of this country, multiple gender and sexual orientations, Black, Brown, Asian, Biracial — basically far more diverse than when I was here.

You ventured to places like Brazil, China, Mexico and France. You speak multiple languages. You care about people who are suffering — about famine in the Horn of Africa and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. You engage with the world.

I even learned that knitting is becoming a serious thing here.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge that for some of you, your experience here may not have been easy. When I went to school here, it was also difficult for me to navigate as a scholarship kid, a student of color, and from the Montbello neighborhood of the Denver corridor. What I can tell you is that the hardship you endured makes you stronger.

Trust me, it gets better.

But the overwhelming theme that emerged from my reporting is that the Class of 2025 is an excited class — an energized class, one that's eager to get into the action.

You are ready to graduate. You are ready for this speech to be over!!

One of the most incredible things I learned though is that 15 of you are graduating with minors in journalism. This is inspiring because there wasn't a journalism minor here when I was a student. And I'm proud Colorado College established the Journalism Institute in 2016.

But you are graduating at a moment when journalism is under attack. Higher education is under attack. The U.S. Constitution is under attack.

The truth is, I fear for this current time. A lot of us do. I believe it is important to recognize when we're feeling vulnerable, uncomfortable and afraid. I invite you to begin this next step in your journey by cultivating a relationship with fear. It is in this kind of reflective work we learn to overcome difficult moments.

You are graduating at a moment when it is vital to take a stand.

For my part, I stand for the right to continue reporting and making documentary film.

I stand for press freedom.

I stand for academic freedom.

I stand for the students and the faculty of Colorado College to continue the liberal arts tradition — to continue controversial and challenging discussions across campus and in the classroom.

I stand for scientific research, the humanities, the arts.

And I stand for you, the graduating class of 2025 — confident in your will and talents to make our country and our world a more peaceful and equitable place. I invite you to stand up for your own voice and freedom of expression. Commit to the facts. Subscribe to the journalism that is vital to our democracy.

I think often about the words of Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Maria Ressa. “Silence is consent.” Don’t be silent.

However, in these moments, there are still things that give me joy and comfort.

Like, the fact that Ice-T is still playing a detective on Law and Order Special Victims Unit, after 25 years.

Continuing to reach out to CC alumni like David Burnett and Neal Baer.

The work I do still reveals awe and wonder in the people I meet in this world.

And the memory of Professor Adrienne Seward and her words. They continue to give me comfort:

“Don’t close your eyes, keep them wide open. Your eyes adjust. You sense the obstacles in front of you. Focus on each step. You’ll know when to speed up. You’ll know when you get braver.”

I’ll just add: You don’t have to be brave alone. Today you join the Colorado College community stretching far beyond the boundaries of this campus.

Let’s be brave together. Let’s stand together. Thank you.